



Wajda Redivivus

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years before the more famous *Flesh and the Devil*.

Not the least interesting part of the retrospective were the short subjects: a series of DeForest phonofilms, sound-on-film records of vaudeville acts made in the early twenties in the days before the Vitaphone. Viewing perfectly synchronized and audible talkies made before *Potemkin* is a bit of a shock, and certain of the films even maintained their entertainment value, notably reels featuring Eddie Cantor, Webber and Fields, and DeWolfe Hopper in a dramatic recitation of "Casey at the Bat." One hundred reels of phonofilm material were donated to the collection by Maurice Zouary, a private collector who had painstakingly assembled them over

the years (one wonders what happened to the pre-1914 sound-on-film experiments of Eugene Lauste?).

The excitement generated by the retrospective proved two things: first, the next few years should see quite a shake-up in the writing of American film history; and second, the establishment by the AFI of repertory cinemas across the country to get these films to their audience must be made the prime consideration after the nitrate preservation project itself. If everything in Washington goes as planned, we will all at some near future date have the mixed pleasure of seeing a good many pages of film history being eaten by their outdone authors.

KRZYSZTOF-TEODOR TOEPLITZ

Wajda Redivivus

Two new films by Andrzej Wajda, *Everything for Sale* and *A Fly Hunt*, appeared on Polish screens during 1968. They show a startling and intriguing change in style for the maker of *Canal* and *Ashes and Diamonds*, and their rapid production may signify that Wajda is beginning a new and vigorous period of creativity.

The "new Wajda" we see in these films is, however, clearly linked with the old, one of the leaders of the Polish school of the fifties; indeed the new could not exist without the old. To understand these new films, then, it is necessary to have in mind some of the background of the postwar Polish film. When Wajda's new films were presented at Cannes, they were criticized as "uncommitted," "escapist," and so on—probably in large part because critics are accustomed to Wajda as dealing with elevated moral and historical problems and felt uncomfortable when he presented them with something new. But we must also bear in mind that in Poland

—as in the rest of Eastern Europe—the arts have been confronting two main problems: the national problem, and the civilization problem, and Wajda's work must be seen in that context.

The former stems from the geographical fact that during the last century the very national survival of the Eastern European nations was in doubt. The "fate of the nation" motif expressed so frequently in Polish films of the fifties connected strongly with a whole cultural and artistic tradition going back to the early nineteenth century. Wajda was among the most faithful continuers of this tradition. *A Generation* and *Canal* speak of the struggle for independence during World War II; *Ashes and Diamonds* treats the difficult, ambiguous moment when independence was regained—bringing with it the necessity to make sometimes tragic political decisions; and finally *Ashes* turns to motifs found in the Napoleonic era. All of these Wajda films, like many by other directors, spring from the

national problem—not only in their themes, but also in their style of narration, which is not free from dramatic symbolism and romantic pathos.

During the last years—30 years after the onset of World War II and 25 years after its end—the second problem has come into its own: the problem of civilization in a free country, no longer threatened by extermination. The post-war euphoria at having our country back again has had to give way to considerations of the present, of the actual state of the nation. New concerns have steadily appeared among thinking artists, intellectuals, and the public—fragments of which we will find in Wajda's new films. The threats to nationhood have receded; the threats now are backwardness, deficiencies in civilization, the danger of being wiped off the map of Europe not by military aggression but by being eliminated from the game as an economic or cultural partner. In this perspective Wajda's news films, charged with indifference or uncommittedness, can be seen as in fact a desperate effort to maintain a dialogue with modern tendencies of European film—an attempt to "Europeanize" Polish film and the Polish audience. In the eyes of Western critics these efforts may seem derivative; or perhaps the results do not match the expectations that critics had of Wajda. In the Polish context, however, they are films of great importance.

Signs of a coming turn in Wajda's work can be discerned in earlier films. *The Innocent Sorcerers* is an attempt to penetrate the milieu of post-war youth; the Wajda episode in *Love at Twenty* is a delineation of confrontation between the new generation, altogether unacquainted with the war, and the protagonist of the quintessential wartime tragedy (Zbigniew Cybulski). In both films Wajda was trying to abandon his classic hero—a man of his own age, who matured during the occupation and the first postwar years. He was also chafing against his usual style, with its tendency toward romantic symbolism combined with surrealistic innovations perhaps derived from Buñuel. At the time, however, continuation on this line must have seemed futile to Wajda, or he would not have embarked on the huge spectacle film *Ashes*.

Meanwhile drastic changes have taken place both in Polish and world film: the French *Nouvelle Vague*, the Italian films of Fellini and Antonioni, films of Polanski and Skolimowski. Wajda was not one of the precursors of new dramatic concepts and methods of film narration—which generally could be considered ways of "poeticizing" the medium, a shift toward reliance on visual interest and gradual abandonment of the resources of "canned theater." Although Wajda has a strong visual sense, he cherished too strong a commitment to narrative principles to sail the troubled waters of the stream of consciousness and arbitrary mixing of different levels of reality. His restraint in this respect is comparable to that of the new American directors, or Antonioni—whose *Blow-Up* could hardly be regarded as a blow against traditional principles of film narration.

With his two new films, however, Wajda has declared his adherence to the "new cinema." *Everything for Sale* is unquestionably a major turning point in his work. It takes up and critically re-examines two major aspects of his previous artistic achievement, both embodied in the figure of Wajda's familiar hero, Cybulski.

However we might now, after his death, evaluate Cybulski's over-all achievement as an actor, his symbolic role in Polish society's consciousness cannot be disregarded. As a symbol he fired our collective imagination with his tragic stray in *Ashes and Diamonds*; yet before long no one quite knew what to do with this symbol of the generation of patriotic young men who made a political error. Postwar youth delighted in his style, but showed no signs of imitating his mistaken political ardor. The great social myth turned out to be socially unfunctional: how could anyone imitate a hero whose heroic renunciation of personal goals no longer connected with a society devoted to catching up to western levels of consumption? The Cybulski figure became a pious myth; nobody questions it, but it no longer has any true devotees.

This situation also led to suspicions of mythomania, which found their most drastic expression in Konwicki's film *Salto*—in it Cybulski played a man supposedly hiding from his own

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past, supposedly tormented by nightmarish recollections of the war, but in fact running away from his demanding wife and numerous progeny.

Cybulski's sudden accidental death was the starting point for *Everything for Sale*, whose story concerns the disappearance of a famous actor during the shooting of a film. (It is clear from many references that Cybulski is meant—though he is never actually seen. The director of the film resembles Wajda himself, and his wife is Wajda's actual wife; nor does this exhaust the many incidental connections within the film.) The situation gives Wajda the occasion for confronting legend with reality, but he is aware of the danger of facile, shallow “debunking”; the film is far more complex than that. Instead, Wajda is interested in collecting the gestures, impressions, and various incidental fragments of personality or image which the dead actor scattered among the living, and showing how these “crumbs” constitute an awkward gift, like some heirloom one is dearly attached to and yet can do nothing with. The dead actor's legend persists among the living characters as a challenge; attempts to meet it result only in buffoonish or ludicrous gestures. A young actor, dreaming of taking the place of the deceased, hunts through the scraps of his life for materials with which to recreate and then usurp a legend which has already fatally dissolved. The actor's wife pitifully tries to promote a legend of their ideal marriage, which all know to be false.

The discrediting of the legend is here realized much more subtly than in *Love at Twenty* and more profoundly than in *Salto*, where Konwicki indulged in mockery and derision. In *Everything for Sale* the focus shifts to the deceased actor's milieu—upon which his disappearance seems to throw a dazzling light. Among his colleagues, former girl-friends, and acquaintances the old heroic impulses have given way to personal, family, or erotic dramas. Nor does Wajda imply in the slightest degree that these are demeaning; on the contrary, it is the exaltation connected with the dead actor that seems anachronistic, and although the director figure goes through a crisis of conscience in deciding to finish his film,



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he is not portrayed unsympathetically. It turns out, in fact, that the actor-symbol had been dead long before his actual death. And thus in a literal as well as semi-magical way Wajda manages to shift his point of view from identification with the actor to identification with his milieu. The symbolic transfer performed by Wajda in *Everything for Sale* resembles the operation which Mickiewicz performed in *Dziady* (*Forefathers' Eve*) by making his protagonist write on the cell wall: “Gustavus obiit—natus est Conradus.” In Wajda's case, however, the metamorphosis is reversed: it is the romantic Conrad who dies, and Gustave who is born.

By contrast with Wajda's previous film, *Everything for Sale* introduces us into an entirely new world. Instead of experiences dictated by the great storms of history, we face those stemming from the variety of human character; instead of tensions arising from military conflicts they come from individual needs, poses, ambitions; instead of pathos there is irony. And finally, absolute conviction about the suggestive power of film as an art is replaced by doubts concerning the very nature of film.

This last point demands particularly careful consideration. Now for the first time Wajda examines formal problems which have preoccupied the world avant-garde for some years. I mean the question of authenticity of film as a document of reality, as well as the question of moral and intellectual justification for telling invented and often conventionalized stories

about nonexistent characters. Eisenstein was conscious of this problem in his early films; to cope with it Dziga-Vertov developed *Kino-Pravda* ("cinetruth"). As an antidote to the incredibility and fictitiousness of film, the Italian neo-realists practiced almost documentary verism in their treatment of actors, locales, and plots. In the late fifties and early sixties, the *Nouvelle Vague* sought to resolve the problem through reliance on the introspective point of view—a technique largely borrowed from the contemporary novel. In his previous films, Wajda attempted to evade the discrepancy between the general character of his themes and the concreteness of his literary plots through the use of visual symbols and metaphors. But such symbolism has limited effectiveness and, moreover, fares ill in a visual medium with the peculiar objective quality of film.

The guiding formal idea of *Everything for Sale* is Wajda's own malicious destruction of his former stylization. The film consists of a series of pietistically constructed, pictorially beautiful images which again and again reveal their artificiality through ever so slight a shift in the point of view. Thus an attractive picture of a young man playing the violin in a snowy park soon proves false: the beautiful park is bordered by an ugly street, and the young man turns out to have staged the scene just for show. There is a magnificent cavalry charge, as in the best of historical reconstructions, yet at the same time we see the camera shooting the scene and we perceive all the fake details, as if in contrast to these beautiful artifacts. The film abounds in such images, always followed by an "exposure," as if the director wanted to demon-

strate the ease of prearranging such scenes, and simultaneously to express his disapproval of their conventional vacuousness. In this way *Everything for Sale* becomes in a sense not only a film about film-making but it also expresses doubts whether film is at all possible.

In short, Wajda, like many other contemporary artists in cinematography as well as literature, faced the problem of self-conscious themes. These themes are both a seemingly indispensable stage of waking up to the peculiarity of one's own creation, and also a dangerous trap. Fellini is the most cautionary example: he immersed himself in the self-conscious form in *Eight and a Half*, but by remaining there (through the "medium" of his wife) in *Juliet of the Spiro's* he managed to communicate nothing more than a mere registration of arbitrary associations.

Wajda's next film, *A Fly Hunt*, based on a screen play by Janusz Glowacki, answers some of the questions I have posed above. The hero is an unambitious, rather clumsy young man, burdened with a large family. By accident he meets a strong, aggressive girl who takes it upon herself to uproot him from his miasma and settle his life. The hero cannot resist her peremptory machinations, yet he has neither the strength nor ambition to be someone he is not. It is a comedy situation, but Wajda uses it not so much as a traditional story but as a philosophical tale of a world in which women play an increasingly bigger role, subordinating men to their goals and ambitions.

If in most Wajda films the starting point was an external situation or historical event within which the director showed human characters and behavior, now the characters realize themselves in situations which, though realistically shown, could be changed without affecting the sense of the film as a whole. In *A Fly Hunt* Wajda is interested in the paradoxical, often psychologically novel situations which result from the headlong emancipation of women, accompanied as it is by widespread emasculation and weakening of man's position. But perceptions of this complex worldwide social and historical process



← Wajda and cameraman Zygmunt Samosiuk.

Malgorzata Braunek
in Wajda's
THE FLY HUNT.



could be realized through diverse cases. A *Fly Hunt* is organized like a traditional story, but with a fabular tone, as of episodes illustrating a presupposed principle.

If such construction is hardly novel, at least it enables Wajda to avoid the doubts that arise from naive film fictionalizing; in this style it is irrelevant whether the vicissitudes of the characters seem really real. What matters is the essential problem around which the film is woven, and if this proves credible even when we make the characters act in purposely exaggerated or fixed circumstances (maintaining of course some degree of believability) so much the better for the problem itself. Needless to add, such an assumption opens for Wajda, for the first time, possibilities of comedy. A *Fly Hunt* becomes a satirical comedy not only through the poignancy of its misogyny but also because of the director's facility in manipulating his protagonist's adventures. Wajda's ease in handling the story recalls Voltaire who, for calculated effect, placed Candide and Pangloss in most improbably prefabricated situations.

From this angle, too, the film attacks Wajda's problem of acceptable film form. He no longer attempts beautiful images, intended to suggest through their intensity some profound meaning. Film language now serves modestly to create a reality which is conventionalized enough to escape the demands of mimetic verisimilitude, while remaining sufficiently realistic and convincing to prevent an immersion in illusion.

Wajda has noticed that the techniques introduced by the film avant-garde in the past decade—the new montage, techniques of manipulating the camera and focus, the ease of arranging scenes having the abstractness of modern painting, camera mobility combined with a penchant for the close-up—in short the entire language of the new cinema calls not for a challenge of the film as a fictional story but for subordinating the narration to an intellectual discipline which no longer needs to rely on plots that unfold step by step. If the traditional director assumed that only a few scenes truly mattered for him, whereas the rest of the film consisted of necessary explications and connections, the modern director can deal only with that which actually interests him—leaving out all the rest.

From this point of view the problem of “beautiful spectacle,” always somewhat bothersome in Wajda's films, disappears or at least loses much of its significance. For here the picturesqueness or harsh brutality of imagery no longer relates in such a direct and univocal way to the subject matter; it is subsumed instead as part of the “handwriting” employed by the director—who may combine different elements of film reality according to his purposes.

Thus, in Wajda's new films, we witness the rare development of a director who attempts to escape—with great success—the magic circle of his own artistic achievements and the problems they inevitably raise.